

A New Rome: Constantinople as the New Imperial Capital

For generations, Rome served as the central city of a steadily expanding empire. Over that time, it grew and adapted to reflect its pan-Mediterranean status, a process that was especially guided during the reign of Augustus, who once boasted that he found Rome a city of bricks but left it a city of marble (Favro 1998). Smaller-scale building projects continued under later emperors, but the city remained largely static in its religious-political practices, continuing to endorse and perpetuate the imperial cult and traditional polytheism. By the beginning of the 4th century CE, the old imperial center had remained largely unchanged for decades; the city was very set in its ways. Constantine was acutely aware of this in 324 when he defeated Licinius to become sole ruler of the empire. When he secured the throne, Constantine publicly claimed Christianity as his religion, declaring that it had played a pivotal role in his victory. Despite recent assertions by some scholars (i.e. Bardill 2012), I remain unconvinced that he was the first Christian emperor. I contend instead that Constantine merely began the process of Christianizing the empire; he was not wholly a Christian, but rather an opportunist. Given Rome's role as the seat of state religion, it was too established in religious observance and traditions to allow for the beginnings of such a drastic transition to a different belief system. I will argue that instead of attempting to work within the physically and religiously rigid confines of Rome itself, Constantine looked elsewhere to leave his lasting mark upon the empire. The site that he chose was originally the Greek town of Byzantium, a small but strategically important city on the Bosphorus, re-establishing it as Constantinople and shaping it in his image.

There is ongoing debate among scholars regarding Constantine's intent in this act. Grig and Kelly, among a seeming majority of others, have approached the relationship between the two cities from the view that Constantine built Constantinople as the "Rome of the East" (2012). They argue that he intended it to be a Second Rome, distinct from but equal to its predecessor, anchoring the eastern half of the empire as Rome anchored the west. Support cited in favor of this assertion includes coins depicting personifications of the two cities enthroned side-by-side (Grig 2012). What is certain is that Constantine embarked upon a concerted architectural and decorative program for Constantinople (Bassett 2007).

This program included an eponymous forum complete with a colossal statue of Constantine himself, the Baths of Zeuxippos, an imperial mausoleum, massive fortifications, and major investments in public infrastructure. He brought in statues and monuments from across the empire to adorn the city, profoundly changing its appearance and propagandistic value (Cameron and Hall 1999, Tueller 2014). Drawing comparisons between the Constantinian and Augustan building programs, and addressing tactical, religious, and practical issues, I will argue that from its inception Constantinople was intended to adopt and eventually surpass Rome's role within the empire.

Bibliography

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